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Where Children Live When Parents Are Incarcerated

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When parents are incarcerated, they often leave children behind. In 1999, an estimated 721,500 state and federal prisoners were parents to nearly 1.5 million children under age 18. Who cares for children when a parent is incarcerated, and the services they and their caregivers receive, are clearly pressing issues.

The needs that children have, and where these children are placed during a parent's incarceration—whether with the other parent, with a grandparent, relative, or in foster care—may have important implications for how children fare during a parent's incarceration. Elizabeth Johnson and Jane Waldfogel, in their JCPR working paper, **Children of Incarcerated Parents**, examine the risk factors facing children of incarcerated parents and how these factors relate to children's living arrangements during incarceration.

The authors analyze data from the 1997 Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities on 6,870 fathers and 2,047 mothers who were incarcerated in state or federal prison in 1997 and who had at least one child under age 18. They examine eight documented risk factors for poor developmental outcomes to determine what, if any, association exists between these risk factors and children's placements. The risk factors are low parent education, parental substance use, parents' mental health or emotional problems, low socioeconomic status, parental history of sexual or physical abuse, past incarceration of parent or grandparent, and a parent's own history of foster care. Identifying links between risk factors and living arrangements, the authors suggest, can guide service providers in tailoring and coordinating services for these children.

Factors Associated with Different Types of Placement

In 1997, the year of the survey used in this study, only about 2% of children of incarcerated parents entered the foster care system, while about 12% lived with grandparents or other relatives. The remaining children live in a variety of arrangements, including living with the other parent, on their own, or in some other form of care.

Which parent is imprisoned often affects placements. The majority (77%) of children whose fathers are incarcerated remain or go to live with their mothers, while about 15% live with a grandparent or relative. When mothers are incarcerated, children most often live with grandparents or other relatives. Only 17% live with their fathers. Children of incarcerated mothers are also more likely to be placed in a foster home—6% compared with 1% of incarcerated fathers' children.¹

As the number of risk factors that characterize a child increases, he or she is less likely to be placed with a parent and more likely to be placed in foster care. Among children of incarcerated mothers, nearly 30% with no risk factors were placed with the other parent compared with 9% of children with six or more risk factors. Children with no risk factors were never placed in foster care, while 11% of the children with six or more risk factors were. Children with six or more risk factors were most often placed with grandparents or other relatives. The patterns for children of incarcerated fathers are similar.

Looked at another way, each additional risk factor among children of incarcerated mothers raises the odds by 16% that the child will be placed with a grandparent or relative, by 54% that the child will be placed in foster care, and by 37% that the child will be placed in some other arrangement,

¹ Parents did not have the option in the survey of identifying "kinship care," i.e., care with a relative that is paid as foster care. Thus, it is likely that children in kinship foster care are counted here as living with a grandparent or other relative, not as children in foster care. The number of children in foster care may thus be understated.

including living on their own, in another type of care, or in multiple arrangements. These effects are above and beyond other family characteristics that might affect placement type, such as race, poverty, and single parenthood.

For children of incarcerated fathers, the effects are again similar, although weaker statistically. With each additional risk, the odds of a kin placement increase by 7%, the odds of foster care placement increase by 47%, and the odds of being placed in another type of arrangement increase by 19%. Given these statistically weaker effects, fathers' characteristics may be poorer predictors of living arrangements of children.

The types of risk also are linked with placement type. The factors that are associated with foster care are having a parent who was abused physically or sexually as a child, who dropped out of high school, who received public assistance, and who used drugs (the latter for fathers only). Drug use among mothers is associated with grandparent or other relative placements. A mother's own history of foster care doubles the odds that her children are in foster care. Receiving public assistance also nearly doubles the risk that her children are in nonparental care (either foster care or with grandparents or relatives).

At the same time, there are several other risk factors that have little or no bearing on placement type, including past prison records of both the mother or her parents, or, surprisingly, a mother's history of emotional or mental health problems. The father's incarceration history, however, does affect the child's odds of being placed in nonparental care.

Policy Implications

The results speak to a need for a broader service response to these children, one that reaches out to all nonparental caregivers. Children who are placed with relatives are often a higher-risk group than those who live with their other parent. At the same time, children who are placed in foster care warrant special attention as well; they, too, are a high-risk group of children, often with three or more risk factors for poor development and outcomes.

Few child welfare agencies have specific policies and procedures to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents. It is particularly important that permanency planning for these children recognize their special circumstances and needs and take into account the challenges faced by incarcerated parents and the problematic histories of these families.

Policies for children of incarcerated parents must also take into account their diversity. Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to be placed in foster care or with grandparents than children of incarcerated fathers. Children of incarcerated mothers also have more risk factors than children of incarcerated fathers. Thus, children whose mothers go to prison are likely to have different, and more intensive, service needs than children whose fathers go to prison.

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